

“The Value of Networking for Environmental Career Success”

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On September 1, 2016, David Hanselmann, lecturer and coordinator of the Environmental Professionals Network for the School of Environment and Natural Resources, presented “The Value of Networking for Environmental Career Success” as the kickoff for the Fall 2016 SENR Seminar Series. About 75 students attended, mostly MS students in the SENR program.

Hanselmann worked for 35 years at the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, including 20 years as assistant chief and nine years as the chief of the Division of Soil and Water Conservation, and during his final two years also serving as chief of the Division of Recycling and Litter Prevention. His responsibilities included support for Ohio’s 88 soil and water conservation districts, with 440 elected board members and over 500 staff.

He joined SENR in 2011, where he started the now 1800-member Environmental Professionals Network. He also teaches ENR 5194, Conservation Practices and Planning, which I took in Summer 2015. It was a fantastic course that really showed the fruits of Hanselmann’s wide network. Each day included a field trip to a different conservation site around the state, often hosted by various county Soil and Water Conservation Districts. We also attended an EPN breakfast. I learned so much from that class about the way conservation practices work in practice on farms, in urban areas, near streams and lakes, even at a fracking site.

Hanselmann started by telling us his life story – basically how he got into environmental issues and how one thing led to another to build his career. Among the things I didn’t know about him are that he spent a summer during high school doing research on stomata in Douglas fir trees in Washington, spent three days talking to families in Eastern Kentucky impacted by runoff from coal mines, flew over the Arctic ice in the 1970s when it was still over 1000 miles wide in summer, organized the first Earth Day as a college student at Purdue University, lived in the Andes for six months doing research as a graduate student at Duke University, and organized the Research Triangle Park chapter of the Sierra Club in North Carolina.

Among the lessons Hanselmann said he learned from his career are:

- Make your own luck by working hard, smart, and strategically.
- Volunteer outside your immediate assignments and learn new skills.
- Pay attention to what’s going on outside your immediate area of expertise.
- Be persistent – projects can sometimes take years to fund and complete.
- Learn to work productively in teams.
- People are increasingly changing jobs more as work is done on a project basis.
- Think about how networking can help not only you but your organization.

Hanselmann also discussed why people should network. Among the reasons:

- To cover areas where you are weak or deficient, fill in skill gaps
- To ally with other organizations
- To avoid duplicating efforts
- To gain more buy-in and consensus toward a common goal
- To broaden your horizons and expand your knowledge

- To create new colleagues and friends
- To develop communication skills
- To promote your organization in the outside world
- To gain new leadership opportunities

The challenge of networking is that it takes time and effort. To address this, Hanselmann also discussed the hows of networking.

- Identify events that you can network at. Then arrive early and make yourself available to meet new people and have conversations.
- Be prepared. Have an elevator speech about yourself ready and have business cards.
- Follow up, even if it is just a thank you or nice meeting you message.
- Be aware of what other people might be trying to get out of networking.
- Participate on social media but keep it positive.
- Don't let networking become all consuming.

A few final points Hanselmann made were:

- Each person has a personal brand. Write out a statement for yourself of who you are, what your values and ethics are. You might never use it directly, but it puts into words how you want others to perceive you. You must manage and protect your brand.
- Each of us is a leader in some capacity. Society needs us to step up and play a leadership role in whatever way we are meant to do. We should not shirk that responsibility.
- Understand the culture of the organization you are thinking of joining. Hanselmann was the first non-farmer to lead the Soil and Water Conservation Districts in Ohio. That meant he had to temper some of his activism as a leader in the Sierra Club.

This was a really great talk by Hanselmann full of good advice about networking. But there were a couple of things I wasn't sure how to apply to my own situation. First, I am not just starting out as most of his target audience in the room is. This for me is a career change. So putting together an elevator speech to explain what I'm doing is a bit more complicated.

I also think some things in the world have changed since Hanselmann started his career. One thing is the rise of social media. Hanselmann mentioned being forced to use social media several times. I use it constantly. So much important news comes over my social media feeds that I can't get through mainstream media. For example, I know a lot about the Dakota Access Pipeline protests in North Dakota, and the issue of pipelines in general, because I follow pages and people who post from the scene and who are writing about this issue. Mainstream media have barely mentioned it, and when they do, it is usually through the lens of authorities such as the county sheriff rather than the native people protesting a pipeline that threatens their water supply, being pushed through their land without proper easements or a full environmental assessment.

The pipeline controversy highlights another difference from the time Hanselmann was starting out and now: Government has become a lot more dysfunctional. Many state and federal agencies are so compromised by the revolving door with industry that they can't effectively regulate the industries they are supposed to oversee, while many elected officials are funded by the same industries that need to be regulated. Forty years ago I might have aspired to work for a government agency, but now I don't think I could get hired because I could not stay silent.

This is why I'm looking at transitioning into a job in activism, working outside both government and industry to pressure the government to do its job. However, even talking about such issues is controversial in many circles. In the case of fracking, for example, I think it should be banned, but if that is not possible, then at least it needs to be heavily taxed and not allowed in areas where the community doesn't want it. Yet in Ohio the Supreme Court has struck down local laws on fracking, and the industry doesn't have to disclose chemicals it uses even to first responders.

How can I network effectively with people who work for the fracking industry or with the government officials who are allowing this outrageous state of affairs to go on? It would be extremely awkward, to say the least. I'm not even sure how to talk about it with ordinary people. This makes basic things such as coming up with an elevator speech difficult. Times are much more polarized now than when Hanselmann was starting out, and no matter what I come up with, it's going to offend someone. The answer, I suppose, is to speak the truth I see in the world even if it upsets someone. But that's hard when I don't have a secure position to speak the truth from.

Hanselmann talked several times about being strategic, and mentioned that he had to temper his Sierra Club tendencies to work with farmers through Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Of course I want to understand what things are like from their point of view. But at some point, if they are causing runoff that is poisoning our waterways with toxic algae, we have to take action. Voluntary measures such as David advocated for when he was in office are not working. At some point you have to draw the line and say we need laws and penalties for breaking them.

It is the same with fracking, pipelines, and other fossil fuel infrastructure. Climate science tells us that 80 percent of fossil fuels must stay in the ground in order to have a chance for a livable planet by the end of the 21st century. Even the Paris agreement, breakthrough though it was, will put warming at 3.4 degrees C, not the 2C that scientists say is the upper limit for life, much less the 1.5C that the agreement calls for. We are at 1.5 degrees now if you count the 0.8C warming since the Industrial Revolution, and the 0.8C locked in from the carbon we have already emitted.

This week President Obama and the leader of China formally committed to the Paris agreement. Yet the Dakota Access Pipeline was approved and auctions continue to lease our oceans and public lands to oil and gas drilling. This has to stop if we are to meet the terms of the Paris agreement and have a livable planet for the next generation. We can't continue approving fossil fuel infrastructure while claiming we want to get off of fossil fuels. We must remove fossil fuel subsidies and tax fossil fuels while incentivizing renewables. Yes, this will be a major fight – the fight of a generation if not of all human history – and it's going to offend some people.

That is going to complicate the idea of traditional networking for me. Not even all activist groups are taking a strong enough stand against new fossil fuel infrastructure. For example, the League of Conservation Voters had representatives on the Democratic platform committee who voted against all programs that would cut fossil fuel production while claiming they want to fight climate change. That makes no sense. We are in some very trying times right now, and simply finding an organization that is willing to state what needs to be done is proving a challenge.

So I'm honestly not sure where that leaves me as someone wanting to spend the rest of my working life on climate change. Is there a place for me inside one of these organizations, and if so, will I have to give up some of my key principles to join it? Or would I be better off as a citizen activist working without the power of an organization but free to advocate for what I want? Hopefully the answers to these questions will become more clear in the coming years.